

Preface

THE PURPOSE of this book is to describe and explain the policy of the British Government towards the Jews of Europe during the Second World War. The story has many faces: the question of immigration to Palestine; the attitude towards Jewish refugees entering Britain and the British Empire; the reaction of the British Government to the news of the German 'final solution' to the Jewish problem in Europe; the effect on the Jewish problem of Britain's relations with her allies (most notably the United States) and with neutral states; the extent to which the British Government was prepared to give help to Jewish resistance efforts in occupied Europe; the Government's response to schemes for rescuing Jews from Nazi territory. These are some of the main themes. The question of Jewish immigration to Palestine is of crucial importance to the discussion, because it was there that the British Government was most directly and continuously involved in the problem. The internal history of Palestine in this period lies beyond the scope of this study, and no attempt has been made to deal with it except where this is necessary to an understanding of the central theme.

The sombre nature of the subject and the depth of feeling which it evokes alike dictate precision in the use of evidence. Fairness requires that the evidence be presented in as complete a form as possible. The most faithful way of communicating to the reader the considerations in the minds of policy-makers is through their own contemporary words. I have therefore not hesitated to quote, often extensively, from the sources. These are all documentary, and include diplomatic notes, minutes of meetings, private letters and diaries, some published but most stored in archives. The documentation is extremely rich and I am greatly indebted to the generous assistance of archivists and librarians in Britain, Israel, and the U.S.A. All the official papers concerning this subject in Israel and the U.S.A. are freely open to inspection by historians. Most of the relevant official papers in Britain are now similarly available in the

Public Record Office. But the British Government continues to bar access, beyond the normal thirty-year period, to a small number of files, among which are some dealing with Jewish illegal immigration to Palestine and the wartime internment of aliens in Britain as well as other matters relevant to the subject of this book. The Foreign Office refused a request for permission to examine for the purposes of this study certain of these withheld files. However, in response to a similar request, the Home Office agreed to make available to me a number of such files. I have been greatly helped in my efforts to make sense of the documents by interviews with some of those who were involved in the events here described, and I am very grateful to them. However, the conclusions of this book are based entirely on documentary evidence.

The essence of this story is a clash of priorities. For the Jews of Europe the essential goal was survival, for which victory over the common enemy was an indispensable, but not a sufficient, condition. For the British Government the first priority and chief preoccupation was, of necessity, victory in the war. 'Everything for the war, whether controversial or not, and nothing controversial that is not *bona fide* needed for the war'¹—Churchill's dictum in October 1943 neatly encapsulates the principle on which British wartime policy-making was founded. The problems discussed in this book were, for the Jews of Europe, a matter of life and death; they were of only secondary importance in the eyes of the British Government. The clash in priorities was the natural result of discrepant interests. Yet the question arises, and it is the fundamental question which echoes through this book: was Britain's wartime policy towards the Jewish problem the *only* possible one compatible with the overriding end of victory?

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For this new edition a few minor corrections have been made to the original text.

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¹ Quoted in Paul Addison, *The Road to 1945: British Politics and the Second World War*, London 1975, p. 253.

Britain and the Jewish Problem

THE JEWISH problem in the modern world was not a matter of primary British concern; yet it was one in which British Governments in the first half of the twentieth century found themselves inextricably involved. There were several reasons for this involvement. The most important was the assumption by Britain at the end of the First World War of responsibility for the government of Palestine under a League of Nations mandate, and the obligation under the mandate to facilitate the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people. But there were also other reasons for British involvement, for the Jewish question in this period was a secondary but recurrent theme both in British domestic politics and in Britain's relations with other powers. Within Britain the arrival before 1914 of large numbers of Jewish refugees from Russia, and the further influx in the 1930s from the Third Reich produced significant, though not lasting, social and political tensions. In foreign affairs, the Jewish question, while never of central importance, was an element in British relations with several central and east European states between the wars, notably Poland, Roumania, and (after 1933) Germany; and British relations with Russia and the United States of America were to some extent affected by assumptions (not always correct) about the nature and influence of Jewish opinion in those countries.

The entanglement of several of these strands may be seen in the origins of British involvement with Zionism. The first expressions of interest by the British Government in some form of territorial solution to the Jewish problem were made in 1902 and 1903 when there was serious consideration of proposals for British sponsorship of Jewish settlement around El Arish in the Sinai peninsula, or in part of east Africa. These schemes were put forward at a time when the 'aliens question' was a major subject of political controversy in Britain, and one object,

particularly in the mind of Joseph Chamberlain, the chief proponent of the east African offer, appears to have been to divert the flow of Jewish refugees away from Britain.¹ These plans came to nothing. But during the First World War the Government again took up the possibility of promoting large-scale Jewish settlement, this time to Palestine. Among the reasons for this renewal of interest was a rather exaggerated belief in the effect which would be produced on Jewish opinion in Russia and the U.S.A. by British support for Zionism, at a time when the attitude of both powers was considered of vital importance in deciding the outcome of the war. In November 1917 the British Government issued the Balfour Declaration in which it undertook to facilitate the establishment in Palestine of 'a national home for the Jewish people', with the proviso 'that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil or religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country'.

Subsequent British Governments found cause to regret that this pronouncement had ever been issued, for Britain derived little benefit and less credit from three decades of rule over Palestine. In December 1917 General Allenby entered Jerusalem, and by the end of the war the entire country had been occupied by his army, which included three Jewish battalions. British administration of Palestine was regularized in 1922 when the League of Nations confirmed the terms of the mandate accorded to Britain: the text of the Balfour Declaration was incorporated in the mandate. Between 1918 and 1939 the Jewish population of Palestine grew from 56,000 to 475,000, and the Jewish proportion of the population from under ten per cent to thirty-one per cent.² Fuelled by a capital inflow of over £100,000,000 between the wars, a resilient Jewish economy grew up, dominated by the *Histadrut*, the Jewish trade union. Quasi-governmental institutions of the Jewish community were formed with official recognition, the most important being the Jewish Agency for Palestine, which, while it included non-Zionist elements, was dominated by the World Zionist Organisation. Under the political supervision of the Jewish Agency

¹ Leonard Stein, *The Balfour Declaration*, London 1961, p. 33.

² D. Gurevich *et al.* eds., *Statistical Handbook of Jewish Palestine*, Jerusalem 1947, pp. 34 and 47.

and of the *Va'ad Leumi* (the National Council of the Jews of Palestine) there developed an underground Jewish army, the *Haganah*. The numerical, economic, institutional, and military growth of the Jewish National Home was rapid and impressive, but it was vitiated by the opposition of the Arab majority of the population.

Arab hostility to Zionism, manifest as early as the 1890s, became a serious political force in the wake of the Balfour Declaration. After 1918 there developed a nationalist movement which, although riven by personal and clan rivalries, by suspicions between Muslims and Christians, and by social and economic differences among townsmen, bedouin, and fellahin (peasants), commanded widespread support among Arabs. The dominant motif in the ideology of this movement was total opposition to Zionism, to the Balfour Declaration, and to the Jewish National Home. In so far as the mandate incorporated a British obligation to support the national home, the nationalist movement also declared total opposition to the mandate. Arab hostility to Zionism was demonstrated in a series of riots in 1920, 1921, and 1929, in which large numbers of Jews were attacked and many killed. These riots, and the military and political cost of repressing them, raised for British Governments the questions of whether the Balfour Declaration policy should be continued, and whether a British presence in Palestine should be maintained. During the 1920s these two questions were regarded as being connected, since it was felt that the British presence in Palestine derived much of its justification from the Balfour Declaration. The continuation of the policy was therefore seen as a necessary corollary of British rule. Serious consideration was given to the possibility of withdrawal from Palestine, but the fear was expressed that to withdraw would be to invite another power—France, Italy, or a re-nascent Turkey—to move into the vacuum created. No such potentially hostile presence could be tolerated in the vicinity of the Suez Canal, the jugular vein of the Empire, and an essential interest of the highest priority which no British Government could afford to imperil. Britain therefore remained in Palestine, and the Balfour Declaration policy was maintained, although some concessions were made on marginal issues in deference to Arab opinion.

So long as the post-war settlement in Europe remained stable, British dominance over much of the Middle East secure, and Jewish immigration moderate, it continued to be possible for the British to rule Palestine in relative isolation from political currents elsewhere in the Middle East or in Europe. But these conditions were challenged by the convulsive changes in European politics in the mid-1930s, which drew Palestine inexorably into the whirlpool of world diplomacy and induced the British Government to change course both in its international policy, and, as a by-product, in its attitude to the government of Palestine. The essential reason for these changes was the conduct of the German Government, under Nazi control from 1933, in domestic and international politics, and the example which its behaviour set for other European states to follow.

Anti-Semitism was a European, not a specifically German phenomenon, but it was the policy of the German Government after 1933 that turned it into a European political problem of the first importance. As a popular force anti-Semitism probably struck deepest roots in the heartland of Jewish settlement in Poland, Roumania, and the western regions of Russia. However, from the 1880s onwards, a massive westward emigration of Jews from the Russian Empire, Roumania, and Austrian Galicia into the cities of central Europe, especially Vienna, Berlin, and Budapest, helped to stimulate the growth of anti-Semitism in a new form. Political anti-Semitism became in central Europe a vital ideological element in the mobilization of the masses, particularly (although not exclusively) by anti-liberal and anti-socialist parties. Several explanations have been offered for the endemic grip of anti-Semitism on the popular mentality: it may be understood as a relic of the ancient hatred of the different; as a mutation of Christian beliefs in a post-Christian society; as part of the débris of romantic nationalism; as a product of the social and intellectual upheaval resulting from rapid and uneven industrialization; as a collective psychopathy in which the Jew is identified with the devil; or as a modern version of the witch craze. In countries such as Poland, Roumania, and Hungary between the wars two further reasons stand out: first, the important role of Jews in the development of commerce and industry, their heavy concentration in certain professions such as law, medicine, and journal-

ism, and their importance in the arts, all of which aroused nationalist resentment; secondly, the tendency in these countries to identify Jews with the communist threat. Such fears helped to produce widespread killings and massacres of Jews in Poland and the Ukraine between 1917 and 1921. (It is a significant pointer to the British reaction during the Second World War to what were often regarded as atrocity stories that the British Foreign Office, on the basis of reports from Polish Government sources, was convinced that Jewish descriptions of the pogroms of 1917 to 1921 were greatly exaggerated.)³ In Germany and Austria similar fears and resentments, although with much less grounding in the social and economic relations actually existing between Jews and non-Jews, were prominent in the rhetoric of anti-Semitism. In eastern Europe the nominal equality accorded to Jews under the post-war constitutions and the apparent protection afforded them by special minority treaties appended to the general peace settlements failed to get rid of anti-Semitism. But it was only after the revolutionary change in government policy towards Jews in Germany after 1933 that political anti-Semitism acquired an irresistible momentum as a force in European politics.

Following the Nazi capture of power in January 1933 the half million Jews of Germany were subjected to a series of legal enactments whose cumulative effect was to exclude Jews from the civic and economic life of the country. In 1933 laws were passed barring the employment of Jews in the civil service, universities, and schools, and in the legal profession. Jewish

³ Estimates of the number of victims vary: C. Abramsky, in 'The Biro-Bidzhan Project', in Lionel Kochan ed., *The Jews in Soviet Russia since 1917*, p. 64, considers reliable an estimate of 200,000 Jews massacred in the Ukraine alone. S. Ettinger, in *A History of the Jewish People*, ed. H. H. Ben-Sasson, London 1976, p. 954, estimates 75,000 deaths in the Ukraine and 'several thousand' in Poland. Norman Davies, in 'Great Britain and the Polish Jews, 1918-20', *Journal of Contemporary History*, April 1973, vol. 8 no. 2, seeks to justify the scepticism of the Foreign Office regarding the ferocity of the pogroms in Poland. He argues: 'That fewer than 1,000 Jewish civilians died when the Polish Army during the same period suffered over 250,000 casualties is a fair indication of the scale of the disaster.' Davies, however, admits that in the Ukraine, as distinct from Poland, 100,000 Jews died. The occupation of Ukrainian territory by the Poles in the Russo-Polish war renders the distinction somewhat academic. For a contemporary account by Israel Cohen, who visited Poland as special commissioner to investigate reports of the outrages, see Israel Cohen, 'Diary of a Mission to Poland, December 1918 to January 1919' and 'The Lemberg Pogrom December 1918' in Israel Cohen, *Travels in Jewry*, London 1952, pp. 48-92. Cohen's report, on his return from Poland, substantiated the earlier Jewish accounts of serious and widespread violence.



BRITAIN AND THE JEWS OF EUROPE 1939–1945

BERNARD WASSERSTEIN

'Bernard Wasserstein's outstanding book . . . tells his terrible story with such exemplary calm and scholarly restraint that the reader is left fuming with impotent chagrin and grief. . . For all its attention to balance, and its scrupulous fairness, his book leaves a stain of moral ignominy on the history of the British official class that no future account of the war will ever efface.'

Simon Schama, *New Society*

In 1942 Anthony Eden declared to the shocked House of Commons that the Germans were 'now carrying into effect Hitler's oft-repeated intention to exterminate the Jewish people of Europe'. Yet for the duration of the war the British government continued to reject all proposals for saving even a small minority of the Jews, whose escape routes from Europe it had already sealed.

This book examines British policy towards the Jewish problem during the Second World War. Based on archival sources, it explores the reasons for the near-total ban on Jewish refugee immigration to Britain, the restrictive immigration policy in Palestine, the failure to aid Jewish resistance in Europe, and the rejection of the scheme for the Allied bombing of Auschwitz. What emerges is a lamentable story of bureaucratic complacency, inhumanity, and blindness to the Jewish catastrophe in Europe.

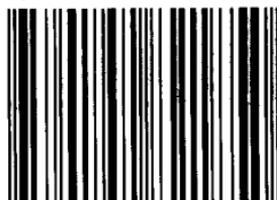
'lucid, comprehensive, indeed exemplary'

Elie Kedourie, *New York Review of Books*

Bernard Wasserstein is Professor of History at Brandeis University. His other books include *The British in Palestine* and *The Secret Lives of Trebitsch Lincoln*.

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